

BUILDING IN CONTEXT

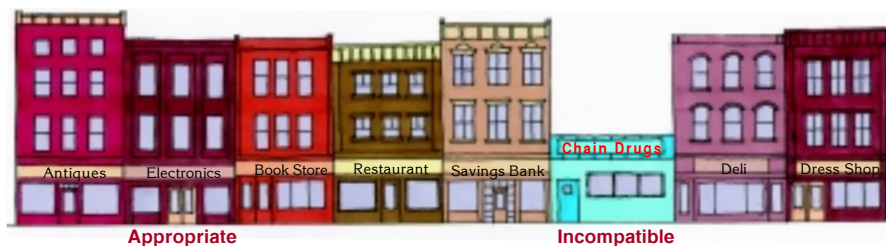
Insist on new construction that is compatible with the existing community context and nearby distinctive or historic buildings, while still adding interest and variety to the streetscape.

Architecture is the most visible expression of local history and a new building's contribution to its community. Yet new structures often clash with their older neighbors, sometimes because designers want to make a personal statement or because tight budgets produce bland, boxy buildings.

With exceptions for landmark or civic structures set in prominent locations, new buildings in older areas should relate to the surrounding context to form a more unified sense of streetscape. As one author put it: "Buildings which do not talk to their neighbors are rude." New structures can be differentiated from historic buildings and show progress over time primarily in the details and variations on the overall themes. Repetition of design in multiple building projects or false historic reproductions should also be avoided.



A major addition to this historic bank building in Rhinebeck uses similar building forms and rear parking to blend in with the historic district.



New structures in centers should have similar or complementary heights, materials, colors, window proportions and sign placements.

Context and Compatibility

Compatibility with respected neighborhood buildings can be judged by the following major points of comparison:

- **Heights** are within range of district norm, with one-story structures discouraged in central areas.
- **Front setbacks** form a continuous streetscape, having no big gaps or front yard parking.
- **Roof shapes, slopes, and cornices** are consistent with prevalent types in the area.
- **Rhythm of building spacing along the street and overall scale** are not interrupted.
- **Proportions for facades and window openings** are in harmony with historic types.
- **Materials, textures, and colors** are similar, with natural and traditional building materials preferred.
- **Site details** (porches, entrances, signs, landscaping, lighting, screened parking and mechanical systems) complement traditional examples in the area.

Two new buildings of the same size: one breaks up the facade into complementary roof lines and window shapes; the incompatible example has a bulky mass, conflicting roof and window forms, and front yard parking.



Franchises can Respect Local Identity

The look-alike architecture and standard pole signs of chain stores, gas stations, franchise restaurants, and supermarkets visually dominate many commercial districts. To be “attractive”, meaning both visually appealing and a magnet for business from nearby residents and outside visitors, a place must be distinctive. Just as rarity increases the value of goods, unique places create community pride and economic success. So how can communities ensure that buildings and signs reflect their distinctive local or regional character, rather than accepting anywhere architecture? By simply asking for better:

- Use illustrated guidelines or an exemplary building photo file to positively depict what types of buildings the community values.
- Invite the public to help define local identity so the community will clearly support demands for distinctive building and site design.
- Be prepared by designating local landmarks and historic districts to be protected from demolition or incompatible changes.
- Consider making uses like gas stations, fast food restaurants, and drive-thru businesses special permit uses with specific conditions that help new structures fit in with existing neighborhoods.
- Offer pre-application meetings, rather than just reacting to prepared site plans, so applicants do not waste time and money having to revise standard or unacceptable designs.
- Ask applicants to graphically demonstrate how new buildings will reflect existing precedents in the area.



This fast food franchise in Freeport, Maine was convinced to retrofit a historic house with a rear addition, not demolish and build a new structure.



Hyde Park negotiated with a chain doughnut shop to have a peaked roof, a stone facade that reflects the Town's stone walls, and side and rear yard parking.

Two Recent Chain Drug Stores in Poughkeepsie

This standard franchise design looks the same as hundreds of other places, with a blank wall facing Main Street, and a parking lot surrounding the building.



After input from the neighborhood association, this store was placed on the corner with a direct sidewalk connection, side yard parking, and architecture that better blends with the area.

Sources: Brent C. Brolin, *Architecture in Context: Fitting New Buildings with Old*, 1980
Ed McMahon, “Have It Your Way,” *Planning Commissioners’ Journal*, Fall 1995
David Sucher, *City Comforts: How to Build an Urban Village*, 1995